

SCOTTISH BEAVER TRIAL



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Scottish Beaver Trial: Project Update No. 11 21st January 2011

This is the 11th update on the Scottish Beaver Trial (SBT) and covers activity between 23rd October 2010 and 21st January 2011.

Background

The SBT is a partnership project between the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) and host Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) to undertake a time-limited, five-year trial reintroduction of European beavers (*Castor fiber*) to Knapdale, Mid-Argyll.

The licence for the Trial was granted by the Scottish Government in May 2008, with the first beavers being released in May 2009. The Trial will run until 2014. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) coordinates the independent scientific monitoring of the trial, reporting progress to the Scottish Government and monitoring how the conditions of the licence are being addressed on the ground.

What's been happening in Knapdale?

Firstly let me wish you all a belated happy new year from the Scottish Beaver Trial team.

The first winter of the Trial back in 2009-10 now appears to be setting the pattern for current Scottish winters, with bitterly cold temperatures and prolonged periods of ice over affecting many of us for months. Knapdale was no exception and although its position on the West coast usually results in a mild, damp climate, the steep-sided, wooded 'dales' of the area can act as frost hollows and the lochs scattered throughout the forest have only recently thawed out, perhaps only temporarily before the next cold snap arrives.

This sort of weather affects both the beavers and the field staff connected with the Trial and activity is reduced, but not stopped during the harshest winter months. Beavers do not hibernate, but reduce their activity to conserve energy. Finding food when the surrounding water is frozen can be very difficult and therefore they must depend upon their carefully prepared food caches, which they busily prepare around the lodge during the autumn months. During the autumn the animals also tend to extend and build up their lodges in preparation for the winter and it was fascinating to see all four of our family groups carrying out these meticulous preparations. Like many species of animal beavers aim to put on as much weight as possible during the good times of spring and summer in order to see them through the winter months, and by now the Knapdale beavers will probably be dropping some weight at present.

Much of the monitoring and tracking work out in the Trial area is water based and this means that our field staff and volunteers spend a lot of time in the project canoe or fishing boat and so when lochs are frozen this reduces our ability to monitor and observe the beavers. Despite this night tracking work either side of the Christmas holidays recorded that all of the twelve resident beavers, including the kits born last year were active within their territories.



Beaver footprints and diving holes, Dubh Loch (©SBT)



Frozen beaver pond behind Dubh Loch dam (©SBT)

We have 12 beavers in four groups at four separate lochs within the Trial area. In my last update I told you about 'Elaine' and 'Eoghann', our pair of beavers who were released into the Creag Mhor Loch in the northern part of the Trial area back in June last year. This young pair appears to have made this loch as their home and territory and during the autumn began building a lodge at the site (pictured below). As previously reported Eoghann developed an abscess on his rump some months ago, but regular observations by field staff and discussions with RZSS vets seem to indicate that it is not having any long term detrimental impact upon his health and behaviour.



New beaver lodge on Creag Mhor loch (©SBT)

I am also happy to report that our newest pair of beavers, 'Christian' and 'Trude' have bonded well together and have made Loch Buic their home and territory. Regular visitors to this site have watched as the lodge has steadily grown over time and this is a good sign to show that animals are settling and preparing for the winter.



Loch Buic lodge – centre picture (©SBT)

Access update

The circular track around Loch Coille Bharr which includes the 'Beaver Detective Trail' has now been fully re-opened and the new sections of path are a real improvement on the existing route. Discussions are currently underway between the SBT Partners, FCS and SNH regarding the possible provision of a beaver viewing platform in the vicinity of the Dubh Loch, so watch this space for further news on this exciting development.



New pontoon section on 'Beaver Detective Trail', Loch Coille Bharr (©FCS)

Staff, volunteers & organisation

Our Temporary Field Assistant Nathan Dove moved on from the project at Christmas time and in his place we welcome Robert Needham who joined us in January as our new Assistant Field Officer. Robert has a background in forestry and gamekeeping and has also spent the past two summer's radio tracking wild lynx in Norway as part of a government research project, so he brings with him a variety of valuable skills and experience to assist SBT.

Recent months have seen a surge in interest from school pupils and students looking for work placements, study projects and volunteering opportunities. Due to time constraints we unfortunately are unable to offer study projects for individuals, but we do try to accommodate those who wish to volunteer or carry out work placements, particularly those from local schools. Our first work placement pupil from Lochgilphead High School spent five days with field staff back in November and helped with field sign survey work as well as attending a radio tracking training course. We look forward to another work placement student joining us in the spring.

In my last update I mentioned how the SBT organisational structure had been adapted to help better deliver the Trial in the coming years. A copy of this new structure and terms of reference can be found on the SBT website at in the FAQ section>About the SBT>How the trial is managed.

Interpretation & Education

Although the recent severe weather conditions have inevitably reduced the numbers of visitors to the Trial site work still continues on providing public educational and interpretation activities focused on the project and species. Groups and societies from Lochgilphead, Stirling, Helensburgh and Lancashire have received illustrated talks on the Trial by myself and in late October pupils from Craighfern Primary School in Ardfern enjoyed beaver games and activities in and around their school.

Liaison & communication

On 26th February the SBT Research and Monitoring Coordination Group met at SNH's Battleby offices. This group led by SNH, is responsible for the independent scientific monitoring of the Trial and includes representatives from all of the organisations who deliver monitoring of the Knapdale beavers. The first annual reports from the SBT monitoring activity are now available to view via SNH's website at

www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/safeguarding-biodiversity/reintroducing-native-species/scottish-beaver-trial/

Website & Blog

Up-to-date information on the Trial can as always be found at the SBT website and the official blog. Recent reports and updates can be viewed in Beaver Facts > Publications and News > Project Updates on our website www.scottishbeavers.org.uk

If you have any questions about the Scottish Beaver Trial then please visit our website or contact me at:

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